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ABSTRACT

This paper explains the reasons Empire State College decided to develop a new International Business program using an experiential-learning format, discusses details of the program and how it was organized and implemented in several versions, and makes suggestions about the development of other variations and about how to resolve certain problems that are likely to arise in such non-traditional endeavors. Three tour studies (the first two to Munich and Berlin, Germany, and the third to Brussels, Belgium) are described that had the central goal of providing additional and improved ways of assisting students to learn crucial international business concepts, skills, and other related learnings from which the international business learning contract was constructed. It is noted that these tours illustrate the field experience that Empire State College provided and found successful. The present status of the program and issues to be resolved as well as some suggestions to colleges that may be interested in initiating a similar study tour are also presented. (GLR)

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APRIL 1991

Topic: PRINCIPLES OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS: AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING COURSE

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Presentation at the Tenth Annual EMU Conference On Language and Communication for World Business and the Professions by Phyllis S. Herdendorf, Ph.D.

Topic: PRINCIPLES OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS: AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING COURSE

In this presentation I will explain why Empire State College decided to develop a new International Business program using an experiential-learning format. I will also discuss details of the program and how it was organized and implemented in several versions. I will make suggestions about the development of other variations and about how to resolve certain problems, that are likely to arise in such non-traditional endeavors.

Empire State College was founded in 1971 as part of the State University of new York to meet the educational needs of those persons who require alternatives to the traditional time, place, content and form of higher education. The College offers alternative approaches to structure, academic program and educational methodology that give the adult learner the flexibility to meet varied educational needs. The programs available offer a number of alternatives ways to earn a graduate or undergraduate degree, each arranged so that most of the studying can be done as an independent learner.

Empire State College, which is just one of many Liberal Arts Colleges in the State University of New York system, is unique in that it is structured as learning centers and units located at over 40 sites in the state. At these locations students can get assistance from faculty in undertaking guided independent learning. There is also a center for distance learning. A wide variety of graduate and undergraduate courses and curricula are provided in many different disciplines including the Business, Management and Economics fields of studies. In recent years, some of the faculty at Empire State had become very concerned about properly addressing the expanding needs of its students for International Business courses. Changes in the American social and economic climate and particularly that of New York state with its dependence upon world-wide trade and commerce, industrial production for export, and supportive business endeavors, had to be accounted for in our plans for curriculum change. Therefore, in keeping with the college's 20 year commitment to innovative programing, it was decided to introduce another new and resourceful program that would address some unmet needs of our adult students. Three years ago I began the development of an annual field experience in International Business, available at a different foreign site each year, that would be specifically designed for the working, adult student.

The central goal of the field experience I planned was to provide additional and improved ways of assisting students to learn crucial International Business concepts, skills and other related learnings. Specifically what these would be needed to be carefully delineated in a learning contract. Empire State College professors (mentors) usually draw up a learning contract with a student before beginning a study. The contract clarifies several mutually-determined matters such as: exact topic of the study; goals of the study; the means (learning experiences or activities) that the student will

use to achieve the goals; resources to be used; what the student will produce; and on what basis the work will be evaluated. For the new program, the topic, the goals and the products would be comparable if not identical to those of contracts that might be developed by any of our faculty for use in a typical study in International Business. Examples of partial outcomes might be the understanding of the concept of competitive advantage; or an understanding of the current status of GATT; or knowledge of the problems facing further economic integration of European countries. Examples of products handed in might be a final research paper or a series of case studies prepared and submitted. The means of achieving the outcomes of the study tour would differ from a typical contract, however, which so often must rely mainly on such resources as texts, library books and other printed materials, but in this new situation would be mainly experience based.

It was through the field experience, serving as an alternative means of achieving the specified outcomes, that a second goal of the new program in International Business was expected to be addressed. Empire State College students often feel isolated without the classroom experience. They feel a lack of close contact with other students and would like to have more time to get to know the professors with whom they study. Also working adults typically feel very pressured to handle many demands at once and often cannot devote all their energy to one academic issue or problem even for a short period of time. The new program, structured as a concentrated eight days of living and learning together in a foreign country, was to try to provide a means by which our students could meet these other needs. At the same time, it would provide them with on-site experiences of observing, discussing and participating in questions and answers sessions, and experiencing a foreign culture, all of which would supplement the requisite studying and writing.

Descriptions follow of the new program's first two study tours which were sponsored in 1989 and 1990. Each was intended to provide intensive student-professor contact, constant student-student interaction and many stimulating educational experiences, and serve as a core around which the complete International Business learning contract was constructed. They will illustrate the field experience that Empire State College provided and found successful.

The First Study Tour - Munich 1989

The first study tour was organized to take place in Munich, Germany in June of 1989. It was an eight day program, including a weekend, and consisted of a series of site-visits to a variety of businesses at which tours of facilities, lectures, discussion periods and question and answer sessions took place. The major focus of the study tour was the European Economic Community and its progress toward economic union in 1992. Therefore the public affairs offices with which I communicated, were asked to have representatives ready to talk about the company's views on and preparation for the "European Community '92". We made formal visits to the following companies: Siemans, Paulanerbrau, MTU (airplane turbine manufacturing), Digital Equipment and BMW. In addition, we

were given a guided tour of the Munich Stock Exchange. Extras that some students opted for, but others did not, were tours of the famous technical museum, and historical exhibits provided by some companies in Munich. All students took advantage of the free time on the weekend and in the evening to become acquainted with the rich cultural attractions of the area. Some went to the opera, or concerts, others enjoyed art museums, castles, nearby mountains or cities such as Salzburg.

Each day consisted of a business site-visit, which usually started in the morning with an orientation to the company, often with a stroll through their own historical exhibit and a video or slide presentation about the firm and their goals. After that would be a walking tour of some part of the business' facility that was representative and interesting to visiting students. Usually at lunch time we were invited to the company dining room for lunch with their employees. After lunch would be more visits to view a research facility or something else special and then we would return to a conference room to have discussions with specialists from the company who were prepared to talk about economic union and to answer questions of a more general nature as well. Several times formal lectures were given about the companies' preparation for EC '92 and how they intended to remain competitive in the new, more integrated Europe. And special demonstrations were often arranged for us. At Siemans a new computerized fiber optic splicer was demonstrated. At both BMW and Digital Equipment, our guide was careful to show us some very advanced use of robotics. In every situation, we were given very special consideration and much care was made to provide good answers to all questions posed by the students.

The choice of firms visited was partially determined by which ones were able and willing to host a group of 17 English speaking students for a day's visit, and partially according to my design. I wanted the students to visit some large, well-known Multinational companies, some very typical German firms, and at least one American firm that was doing business in Germany. I wanted the group to observe a variety of activities, in a variety of settings. Some environments would be distinctly different from those in the United States and others would have notable similarities. Students were required to read a general introductory Principles of International Business text prior to leaving for Munich and a short introductory book about the background and goals of the European Community. In addition all were expected to have completed a study of Macro and Micro Economics.

Since the students were drawn from all over the state, I had no chance to sit down with each of them before they arrived in Munich to develop an individualized contract, such as is usually expected. Instead I required the same preliminary reading of each and then had individualized meetings during the time in Munich to spell out any differences in their contracts, which I wrote up once I returned to my office. Most of the students opted for differences in the topic they would use for a final research paper, and took advantage of the discussion sessions at the host firms, to start asking specific questions that would help them with their later research. After the return to the United States I was available by phone to help them through any

major difficulties and they had the rest of the summer to hand in the research paper and a clean copy of a daily journal that each was required to keep for the period we were in Munich.

The study tour in Munich was a wonderful experience for me and for the students. The enthusiastic involvement of all participants was very obvious at all the site visits and all other activities, planned and unplanned. The type of questions asked of our hosts and comments offered was good evidence that the students had come prepared. The research papers were all very good in quality of topics chosen, the insights shown, the library research done and in the writing itself. The journals were very interesting and perceptive, although uneven in actual quality of writing. No problems arose with the tour itself and the College administration as well as the Business, Management and Economics faculty seemed pleased enough with the program to continue it as planned for subsequent years.

A Variation Study Tour - Berlin 1990

Originally, I had planned to visit Brussels for the second year of the program, but then the dramatic developments in Berlin in October and November of 1989, pointed to monumental changes occurring in Europe. Since there was such a strong possibility of reunification of the two Germanies, I decided that our students would have a wonderful opportunity to see change in the process of happening, if the next study tour went to Berlin. The reunification of Germany would have a major impact on the European Community, so EC '92 remained as one focus. Change in Germany itself was the other main focus. Fourteen persons participated in the eight day experience in June of 1990, which was divided between West Berlin, East Berlin and a small town in East Germany which was easily reached from East Berlin. We stayed in a small hotel in West Berlin, because the availability of housing was poor in East Berlin and costly as well. The same general approach to the study tour was retained. My intention was to visit businesses and have the students learn about the changes going on in International Business, particularly in reference to the economic integration of Europe. Added to this, however, was the drama of the social and political changes of East Germany leaving the socialist block and turning toward a new political system and the market economy.

The businesses we visited were: Schering Chemical and Dresdner Bank in West Berlin, the VEB Plattenwerke Prefabrication Enterprises in East Berlin and the VEB IFA Automobilwerke (truck manufacturing) in Ludwigsfelde, East Germany. In addition, we were the guests of the city of Berlin for one orientation meeting about the history of the divided city and how the unification was proceeding and a later follow-up session at the Reichstag building with even more detail. The Institute for a United Berlin sponsored a lecture and discussion session for us with two university professors (one from the East and one from the West) about the economic background and future of the two Germanies. Finally the student association at East Berlin's Hochschule fur Okonomie invited us for an afternoon question and answer session and a general interchange of ideas between students.

Berlin was still completely divided when we visited. Visas had to be purchased each time we left West Berlin and we had only two crossing points to choose from. In many ways it seemed like it was still a Warsaw Pact country and that the Berlin Wall still stood as a barrier to all interchange between my American students and the people and institutions of East Germany. But this was not the case at all. I had no trouble arranging any of the visits on the other side of the still present wall. However, in each case, we were the first non-German Westerners to appear. Neither company had been permitted ever before to welcome groups other than those from Communist countries. The University students also had not hosted students from the West before. The managers at the East German firms were glad to have us and welcomed us with warmth and a great deal of pride in what they could show us. They were not able to use much English, and translation was a bit of a problem once and a while. The East German students did not speak English very well either, but they were determined to proceed with a pairing off into dyads and managed a bit haltingly but ultimately well. Only two of our students spoke any German and that proved to be too little for carrying on a conversation.

Contracts for the study tour were arranged the way they had been for the tour to Munich. I required the reading of a general text on International Business, and an introduction to the European Economic Community, prior to leaving. In addition, I sent a series of copies of articles on developments in Berlin in 1989 and early 1990 to all participating students and suggested that they subscribe to the Economist for additional reading. Also I informed students to consider thinking about a research paper on a topic that included political as well as economic themes. There were several fewer students in this group, which allowed me to provide a little more direction to each, and this resulted in slightly more diversity in the contracts. Two students chose to direct their attention more to the social ramifications of the reunification rather than strictly economic. The quality of the work done was equal to that done in the previous year and the enthusiasm of the students was even more noticeable. All agreed that having had the opportunity to be present in Berlin at such an historic moment was priceless as an educational and a personal experience.

Once again the choice of actual learning experiences was based partially on what I could arrange and partially on what I felt would be a ideal mix. A clipping in January in the Wall Street Journal alerted me to the fact that Mercedes Benz was interested in a joint venture with the truck factory in Ludwigsfelde and I particularly wanted the students to have the opportunity to have explained first hand how joint ventures with a Western company could help an East German Kombinant move into the market economy. Contact with the management went slowly, but was successful. I was also very keen on having the students meet with representatives of one of the two major West German banks, in order to have some explanation of how the currency union was going to proceed. The bank could also provide insights into other financial concerns such as capital availability for entrepreneurs, or the seeking of restitution for land or businesses lost during the communist years. Dresdner Bank was an excellent choice and their East German and Soviet specialist served well as a

lecturer and resource person for us. Schering Chemical was an interesting company to visit. It is the largest employer in West Berlin and we could overlook the wall from their buildings. After seeing some of their operation, we were able to discuss with their spokesmen, both EC ´92 matters and reunification concerns as well. The company lost extensive plants, equipment and money in the communist takeover after World War II. Officials at Schering also shared many facts about the chemical pollution problems that former Warsaw Pact countries are going to have overcome.

The city of Berlin helped me a great deal by having an office and a procedure set up to help student groups. An official from this bureau made suggestions that proved to be most valuable and even arranged at no cost to us, a guided bus tour of the city. The one lecture this official arranged had a professor from the University of the East German city of Karl Marx Stadt speak to our students about how the various curricula were going to change and the effect that would have on business and economics students. However, much of what the students gained from the study tour to Berlin, was realized because they were able to go into East Berlin while it was still essentially a communist city. Once in the east zone they could see what life was like under communism, including work and higher education, and then talk to local people who knew that it was all going to change. Finally, after 40 years of being silent, most of the East Germans we encountered were no longer afraid to talk freely.

Another Variation - Brussels 1991

This coming May, our third study tour will take place in Brussels, the capital of the European Community. A specific focus will be directed toward understanding the political and governmental changes occurring in Europe through the concentration of EC governmental and administrative operations in Brussels. In addition, because of the high number of central offices, corporate headquarters and research facilities of large multi-national enterprises, a second focus to the study group will be directed at some of the corporations which have unique systems or products of interests to a student group. The environmental technology industry will be targeted. The study tour will spend eight days in Brussels visiting Berlaymont, the EC´s headquarters, and businesses such as Caterpillar, Solvay et Cie, Cote d´Or confectionaries, Exxon, and Volkswagen Belgium. Several meetings with EC officials are planned. One meeting will be a orientation to the governmental changes that are occurring in Europe because of the economic integration movement. Another will be at the Industry Directorate for a lecture and discussion about present and future business practices. Students will have time to spend at the research library and the information center to obtain useful materials and sources for their research papers. Also, permission has been obtained to visit the European Parliament which will be in session in Strasbourg during the time we are in Europe.

This study tour, just as the other two, is designed to provide educationally valuable experiences that are directly tied to a study of International Business. It also allows ample opportunities to use free time to have fun and absorb many different cultural experiences. The small hotel we will use this

year is located in the old section of the city, just steps away from the Grand Place. Museums, galleries and historic sites of all sorts are within a few blocks. Students who know French will be encouraged to use it and the history and cultural diversity of Belgium will be highlighted in a walking tour of the city that has been scheduled for the first day. I will suggest and encourage the students to use their weekend time to travel to visit the art museums of Amsterdam or see the tulip fields of Holland or to bask in the medieval atmosphere of nearby Bruge, Ghent or Antwerp.

Present Status of the Program and Issues to be Resolved

The study tour was designed to appeal to both undergraduate and graduate students and since I am on the faculty of both degree program levels, I could have mentored contracts at either level in 1989 and in 1990. However, this is the first year that graduate students have registered to participate and so I was able to postpone dealing with the necessary modifications that would be needed for a more demanding graduate contract. Right now I am in the process of doing that. I am also in the process of improving the utilization, for evaluation purposes, of the daily journal I expect each student to keep. I have applied for a grant to allow me some extra time to work on this element of the evaluation procedure.

In addition I am engaged in the necessary thinking about what the future should be for the program. The College Dean of International Programs had originally agreed with me that the program should run for four years, until 1992, and should feature experiential learning activities in four different European cities. After that the International Business study tour would turn to another area of the world that is also at an important point of change: Hong Kong. We need to discuss soon if we should stick to that scenario or alter it in some way. Right now the preliminary plans for 1992 point to a study tour taking place in Venice, Italy with a possible side trip to a nearby non-EC country. In Venice the students would turn some of their attention to environmental problems facing the EC and on the side trip, to problems of businesses competing with a mighty "Fortress Europe" that is just across what used to be a nearby friendly border. What will happen in 1993 is still not finalized. An additional study tour to Europe is quite likely. The possibility of adapting the format used in Europe to Hong Kong is also good.

Suggestions to Colleges Interested in Initiating a Similar Study Tour

The problems presently facing the Empire State College International Business Study Tour all seem very interesting to me and capable of being resolved, without undue trial and tribulations. But those facing another college wanting to initiate a similar experiential-learning program of study could well seem massive and the following points might prove to be helpful.

A few basic advantages assisted in the development of our program. I had spent several years thinking about such a program before I presented the idea to our administration and faculty. Empire State College is noted for being very open to new and different ideas. The typical stance of a fellow faculty member is to be very supportive of the experimental program of someone else. Our student body is receptive to the idea of getting college credit for something other than a class. Our non-traditional scheduling and structure does not present any barrier to doing a short, intensive program with a professor from across the state. Having taught at quite a few other colleges and universities, I know what sort of barriers can be placed in the way of a person who might want to try something similar to my study tour. However, the ideas set forth here do work and the results are worth the trouble of overcoming the institutional barriers.

Once embarked on the actual planning of a study tour, I suggest that the first experience should be located at a place that is familiar. To embark on a tour to areas that are unknown, would require involving someone who does know the site and that increases costs and some complexity in the planning process. The most important rule is to keep the study tour logistics as simple as possible. The first study tour should also be kept fairly small. Twelve to eighteen students is a good number for one faculty person to work with. The area to be covered in travel should also be kept small. One large city provides enough of anything that is necessary for a program at all similar to what I have described. Almost any area outside of the United States would offer multiple sites that would be suitable. Time in the library will provide a list of names of corporations that can be contacted for site visits in cities around the world. I contact them using the fax machine and addressing my request to the public affairs officer. I use Frommers' tourist guides to get lists of small hotels that are frequented by natives of the host countries and that are near the center of interest. I use the fax machine to reserve rooms several months in advance, no money is needed until about a month before arriving and by then the roster of students should be accurate. Students are charged the cost of airfare, and hotel costs and enough extra to pay for the airfare and per diem costs of the professor and whatever is necessary for phones, mailing and a flyer. These costs can be estimated early on and a flyer can be prepared and circulated about five months before the departure date. Travel agents can help with some details, but in my experience they are not able to assist a great deal in travel arrangements in which the costs need to be as low as possible.

If the professor in charge has not visited the host city in recent years, it is important to bring the knowledge of the city up-to-date. This can be done several ways. If the student group is mature enough, do not plan to accompany them on the outbound trip. Instead plans could be made to proceed them by several days or a week and use the time alone to get to know the area very well and make 'dry runs' to the business and other sites. Experiments with the public transportation system should be undertaken and good places to eat and relax should be sought out. For a second tour, the professor could stay after the first study tour is over and then go to the city that will be

visited the next year. This is a very good idea, because a hour or so with the telephone directory will provide many ideas, addresses and phone numbers. Also a trip to the city tourist center will result in ample materials, maps, tour descriptions plus the names of organizations that can help prepare the learning activities for the study tour. Another approach is what I did this last January. I had not seen Brussels for five years and had forgotten my way around. I got an extremely low cost round-trip airfare (winter rates) and spent a week in Brussels preparing for the study tour and then a spent some extra time skiing in Switzerland as a special treat for myself. Much of the cost will be recovered by using saved-up frequent flyer mileage for the May airfare instead of using the allowance built into the student cost.

Almost everything must be planned out very carefully. Once a site visit is scheduled, it is important to communicate what type of tour is desired, what sort of discussion questions are to be the focus of attention and the type of students (level and extent of background), that will be in the group. Also information should be requested about the exact way to arrive at the location, the type of dress expected by the hosts and whether there will be lunch facilities. (Often the company will invite the group have lunch at its expense if the group is fairly small.) I suggest that public transportation always be used instead of a tour bus, so that students become more involved in the day-to-day routine of the people in the host city. However, using public transportation requires more prior practise on the part of the leader of the group. It is also a good idea to encourage the group to split up into smaller groups to find places for dinner and to spend time in the evening. If the students are not mature enough to do that, the leader will need to make prior plans for a large group at restaurants and that is a difficult, thank-less task. It is best not to allow the group to expect the professor is going to be a leader who will handle everything. The site-visits and other elements of the tour that are of academic significance are what must be carefully controlled. Students should be expected to manage most other concerns on their own.

Hopefully these items of information can diminish the level of uncertainty about developing and implementing an educational experience based on what has been such a marvelous undertaking at Empire State College.